

G.I.'s family returns World War II antiquities to Italy

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Antique books by Isaac Newton and other historical luminaries, lifted from an Italian church by a G.I. during World War II, were returned through a foundation dedicated to the war's "Monument Men."



(Photo: USA TODAY)

WASHINGTON — Antique books by Isaac Newton and other historical figures, lifted from an Italian church by a G.I. during World War II, were returned in a ceremony at the Italian Embassy here on Wednesday, the latest in a call for aging veterans and their families to repatriate such "souvenirs" of the war.

The eight volumes dating from 1533 to 1789 ended up with Irving Tross of Chicago, now 96, who in 1944 was a radio operator with the U.S. Army's 88th Infantry Division. The antique books were among volumes in 170 crates hidden by the University of Naples library during the Invasion of Italy, inside a church that was damaged by shelling.

"For my family, we are really honoring his wishes. He really wanted these returned," says Josh Shapiro, Tross' grandson who represented his now-infirm grandfather during the embassy ceremony Wednesday.

Shapiro learned of the volumes during a family history project sponsored by the U.S. Library of Congress, in which the library asked for live recordings of veterans' war experiences. "There they are, on the shelf," Tross can be heard in one recording played by Shapiro at the event.



Italian Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero and Robert Edsel of the Monuments Men Foundation display the recovered antiquities May 29, 2013, at the Italian Embassy in Washington. (Photo: USA TODAY)

"Fundamentally, we want to raise awareness — the knowledge among families — that in attics and cellars, precious and important works of art may be awaiting their return," said Italian Ambassador Claudio Bisogniero. He noted the decades-long campaign by Italy to return looted works of Italian and Roman art from museums and collections worldwide.

The artworks and books were among the items taken largely by Nazi soldiers, but also by soldiers from other countries and antiquity thieves.

The return of the volumes also represents the latest efforts of the Monuments Men Foundation, a group set to become more famous this year with the release of the upcoming movie, *The Monuments Men*, starring and directed by George Clooney. The film will highlight efforts spearheaded by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, acting as allied commander, in a 1943 order that required all military personnel to safeguard cultural treasures. The order created the Monuments Men, formally the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section, some 345 men and women, curators, librarians, historians and artists, who raced around Europe in the last years of World War II, until 1951, seeking the return of looted artwork and antiquities. The crates holding books from the University of Naples were among those later documented and safeguarded by the unit in 1945 after their discovery.

"These books are only the tip of the iceberg on what was lost during the war," says Robert Edsel of the foundation, author of the just-released *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis*. "Here we have a veteran in the twilight of his life doing the right thing."

Those who want information about returning such antiquities from WWII can visit the [Monuments Men Foundation website](http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/contact-us) (<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/contact-us>)

Ironically, the United States only formally ratified a 1954 international treaty built around Eisenhower's orders in 2008, says antiquities law expert Patty Gerstenblith of DePaul University in Chicago. Eisenhower's elevation of protecting cultural artifacts into a military priority was a far-sighted change to the rules of war, she says. "I think it is a fair question to ask if we are doing as good a job now as we did then," Gerstenblith says.